Personal Weblog's Textual Functions

Stability, Diversity, and Change

1. Introduction

Personal Weblogs can be roughly described as **diary-like texts which are usually written by one author in a reversed chronological order** (newest entries first). Griddle Bandits (2011) provides a typical example of the genre.

Personal Weblogs can be considered **a phenomenon that spread virally around the beginning of the new Millennium**. The earliest *Weblogs*, however, date back to the **late 90s,** as for instance, *Flutterby* from 1998.

In my rough definition of the genre, **I did not make any reference to the function these texts are designed to fulfil**. Indeed, it seems to be quite hard to pinpoint the exact purpose of the genre. During the 15 years of blogging, scholars have repeatedly asked the question of *why people blog.* The chart presents a selection of key studies.

The table illustrates the **sheer diversity of different purposes or functions scholars have come up with so far**. Especially ethnographic studies provide interesting insights into the author's view of their texts' functions. There are, however, some **problematic aspects**:

- The studies are **not focussed on the *Personal Weblog*** as a specific weblog genre.
- The typology proposed by Susan **Herring** and her team is **too broad** to capture the diversity of weblog functions; the results of the ethnographic studies, on the other hand, are **too diverse and mirror idiosyncratic uses**.
- Some bloggers such as Rebecca Blood indicate that **changes of the textual functions of the Personal Weblog might have taken place already**. This diachronic dimension is, if at all, only marginally reflected in those studies.

Therefore, my **research questions** are the following:

1. **What textual functions can be considered typical of the genre** *Personal Weblog*?
2. **What is the diachronic dimension of these functions in terms of stability, diversity, and change as far as the Personal Weblog is concerned?**

I will proceed as follows:

- o I shall **briefly cover the data and the theoretical and methodical** framework of my study.
- o Looking at a variety of sample blog entries, I will **suggest several textual functions**. I can only present a **small selection** here. My suggestions are the preliminary results of work in progress.
- o I will close with an **attempt at sketching out the diachronic dimension** of the functions proposed.

2. Theoretical and methodological framework

2.1. Data

My analysis was based on **three types of sources**:

- **insider reflections**: Barrett (1999a; 1999b), Blood (2000) Benton (2006a; 2006b)
- categories generated in **ethnographic studies** (see above)
- a diachronic **corpus**.

Corpus texts were collected using the Internet Archive and applying an **inductive approach**. The corpus consists of **two parts**. Part I contains specimens of **the very few earliest *Weblogs*** (1997-2000). They form the **root for the differentiation of several weblog genres in the following years**.

Part II assembles specimens of the **more specific category *Personal Weblog*** (2002-2012). These texts were collected from the oldest blog directory *The*

Globe of Blogs, which was founded in 2002. The gap of one year between period I and II is therefore due to the availability of sources.

2.2. Theory

For the current purposes, **I shall conceptualise the textual function as a complex task a text is designed to fulfil**. This complex task may contain *various* **simultaneous components** which are inspired by the basic textual functions proposed by Klaus Brinker in German text linguistics. I shall follow current trends in text linguistics and **assume single genres to be characterised by a set of functions** rather than one single function. The task a text is designed for has to be reconstructed from various **sources**:

- First, the **metadiscourse** of a genre's community about its purpose(s).
- Second, **texts may contain metacomments** regarding their function.
- Third, **texts provide indicators** on several layers. As part of his approach to textual functions, Brinker proposes the following indicators for the functional analysis.

2.3. Method

I tried to integrate both textual indicators and metacomments in a multi-stage process inspired by Grounded Theory. **Basically, I try to find out what the bloggers *say* they do and describe it linguistically**.

- I started with generating **preliminary categories** from the **metadiscourse** of the blogging community represented in insider reflections and ethnographic studies.
- Secondly, I moved on to **Weblog postings containing explicit functional labels** or **comments** to refine the category system and generate new categories. The postings were analysed to gain first category descriptions.

- The results served as **input for step three**, where **all postings** were coded and analysed. Step three is **circular**, moving towards an ever increased understanding of the categories.
- Lastly, whenever new material is found, **the steps are run through again**.

Therefore, the process is an **open-ended, reconstructive process geared towards theoretical saturation**. As in Grounded Theory, I try to **preserve the category names** used by the bloggers themselves. The terms *Filtering, Updating* and *Sharing Experience* are used repeatedly in the blogger's discourse about their texts' functions.

3. Textual Functions

3.1. Filtering

The filter function is probably the **core function of the weblog in period I**. The posting from *Scripting News* shows how authors *filter* the growing *World Wide Web* and **share links they consider interesting**. Sometimes, these links are presented without any commentary. More often, however, weblog authors provide a **synopsis and an evaluation of the source**. The weblog entries often take the form **of lists of mainly unrelated items**.

Another example is taken from *Research Buns*. It illustrates the **language** used in filter postings: We find **deictic pointers** to the sources (*at*, *this*), a dominance of **present tense** and sometimes **imperatives** urging the reader to *check out* the sources. The various topics are mostly treated **descriptively in a matter-of-fact style**.

As the posting from *Fairytale* indicates, the filter function **continues in texts from period II**. However, filter postings in period II tend to contain **lengthier expressions of the authors' opinions** on the linked sources and their content. Thus, the posting from *Coffee Stoned* does not only provide a link to an article

on daylight saving time. It also contains a longer passage serving to express the author's opinion on the issue.

To sum up, the filter function can be characterised as **informing about web-based content and its evaluation by the blogger in a concise way**. **Hyperlinks are a central indicator.**

3.2.   Update

Another important function seems to be the *update*. In general, **update postings deal with daily events**. Updates, too, can be **quite concise** as the example taken from *An Insider's View*. In this posting, the author mimics a telegraphic style to inform about central aspects of his day, using elliptical constructions.

The extract from ... *Life of L...* contains an **explicit marker**, as the author announces *updates* that *sum up* happenings as the purpose of the last section of her post. Again, **her entry shows the form of a list** of only loosely related items.

A closer look at the items reveals that **they are composed equally**: An **assertive** speech act (underlined) is followed by an **expressive** speech act (in bold) carrying an evaluation. Interestingly, many *update*-postings that I have found **tend to this basic construction principle**.

Some corpus texts indicate that updates might **typically be addressed to friends or family members**. We can also find hints at a **limited amount of writing time**: Some updates are evidently produced in lunch breaks or just before heading off to work.

3.3.   Sharing Experience

The last function I would like to suggest is often circumscribed as *sharing experience*. The excerpt taken from *EatonWeb* contrasts with filter- and update postings as it treats a **single incident in an elaborate, coherent way**. The author uses **complex sentences which are linked by various cohesive devices**. The excerpt can be divided into a **narrative part** relating the incident and a **second part containing the author's reflections** or insights triggered by it. The caesura is indicated by a **shift from past to present tense**. This two-fold structure – narration and reflection – **can be found in various corpus texts**.

In other cases, the individual reflections are **extended to pieces of advice or even warnings for the reader**: In the excerpt from *Always Writing*, the author narrates how he posted promotion links on a forum by accident, getting vicious reactions by the other forum members. Because of this experience, he warns other authors not to use that particular forum.

4. Discussion

I described some core functions of the Personal Weblog based on indicators taken from context and structure. The functional patterns described can actually be considered *micro genres* **of postings: Genres are, essentially, fusions of structure, context and function. These micro genres operate within the category Personal Weblog and define its functional set.**

Viewing the patterns as micro genres **facilitates the diachronic discussion**: With the patterns in mind, we can have a look at period I again. The core function in period I is the filter function. The example from *Bump* indicates, however, that the core function of later periods – sharing experience – can also be found in between the commented lists of links.

I approached the issue **quantitatively** as well in order to trace the diachronic dimensions of stability, diversity and change. The results are summed up in this diagram showing the **percentages of weblogs per period exhibiting specific functional patterns**.

The diagram shows: **Update, Sharing Experience and some other patterns can already be found in period I**. Here, the **filter function is dominant** and the other patterns are marginal. In period II, they become **more emancipated**. I would like to interpret these observations as **indicators of functional *stability***.

At the same time, the diagram indicates that **changes** take place as well: We can observe a **shift from one central function (filter) to another** (sharing experience) and an **emancipation of functional patterns** such as update or review. Interestingly, the diagram shows that the percentage of weblogs including the **update-function first rises to a peak in period II.A and then declines even under its period I level**. I think we can assume that the launch of other communicative platforms such as **Facebook (2004) or Twitter plays a crucial role here**.

Finally, the categories established in my analyses are of **course fuzzy and exhibit various overlaps as they are ethno categories.** These overlaps can also be observed among the functions suggested here. Additionally, the overview illustrates that there are **several other functions apart from the core patterns** in each period. Therefore, **stability and change are complemented by the diversity of the communicative reality of the Personal Weblog**.